Studying Social Media communities: Blending methods with netnography

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Table of contents

Table of contents	2
Contributor Biographies	2
Alex Fenton	2
Chris Procter	2
Selected Published Articles	3
Abstract	3
Learning Outcomes	4
Case Study Overview and Context	4
Netnography and blended methods	4
Research Design	8
Practical lessons learned	13
Conclusions	13

Contributor Biographies

Alex Fenton

Alex has worked in the field of digital business as a programmer, developer, researcher and academic. He worked as a senior developer as part of one of the top development teams in the UK and has run a successful and award winning digital agency, EDinteractive, working on some major digital projects. Alex has been a finalist for many top individual and team digital awards including winner of a European Search Award. He has also won and been finalist for a range of local and national teaching awards. He has supervised a wide range of postgraduate dissertations and internships with his students voting him Postgraduate Supervisor of the year and Innovative Lecturer of the Year. His research focuses on netnography, digital transformation, and sport, and he has published popular book chapters and papers on social media and in some of the world's leading journals.

Chris Procter

Chris has extensive experience in teaching and the development of case studies relevant to student learning outcomes. This experience includes collaboration with practitioners over many years in systems analysis, application of information technology, educational research, project management and professional development. Chris has sought to keep the case study at the centre of the triangle of teaching, research and practice.

Selected Published Articles

Anagnostopoulos, C., Parnagas, P., Fenton, A., Chadwick, S, (2018). Branding in Pictures: Using Instagram as a Brand Management Tool in Professional Team Sport Organisations, European Sport Management Quarterly

Businge M. and Procter C. (2014) *Involve Users or Fail: an IT Project Case Study from East Africa* International Journal of IT Project Management Vol 4(4)

Heinze, A., Fletcher, G. A., Rashid, T., & Cruz, A. (2017). Digital and social media marketing: a results-driven approach. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group

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Shemi, A.P & Procter, C.T (2013) Explaining Contextual Factors affecting E-commerce Adoption Progression in selected SMEs: Evidence from Botswana International Journal of Management Practice (IJMP) Special Issue on: "Challenges and Issues of Technology Adoption in Small Businesses – Beyond the Rhetoric" Vol 6(1)

Abstract

In his work 'Netnography Redefined', Kozinets (2015), highlights the massive growth of online communities, calling for new ways of conducting research online. This research explains an application of this approach providing a valuable methodological framework for contemporary Internet based ethnographical research. This case example is derived from an empirical research study of the online communities of a UK football club. This involves the blend of the three qualitative research methods: interview, social network analysis (SNA), and online participant observation. Interviews and participant observation are usual features of ethnographical work but evolving digital tools and social media networks present new research opportunities. The application of netnography and blending of social network analysis therefore presents new opportunities for research. In this case, we describe the tools, techniques and practicalities of applying netnography using blended methods in the digital age. This approach provides a complementary blend for those researchers wishing to study contemporary social media communities. The research application aimed to make an academic and practical contribution to digital marketing, Information Systems (IS) and sport business.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Define the terms netnography, social network analysis, and blended methods
- Analyse social networks using blended methods netnography
- Evaluate the use of netnography for online research

Case Study Overview and Context

Football is an incredibly popular sport around the world. It boasts hundreds of millions of networked fans interacting with their chosen clubs through social media channels and content. This study aimed to discover how fans use social media in the age of smartphones, using a netnography approach. The major football clubs brands have hundreds of millions of online followers from around the world (Parganas et al, 2017). Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram are just some of the social media channels that enable fans to consume content and interact with clubs and fellow fans whenever and wherever they like. The huge global growth of connected football fans has also grown in parallel with that of smartphones running social media apps. Smartphones are an enabler to the global support of football clubs (Helleu, 2017). The question of why football fans support from afar and how they use social media networks is not well covered in the academic literature (Kuzma et al, 2014). In a practical sense, football clubs wish to understand more about their social media fans from around the world.

In order to study football fans on social media and to understand the complexity of human meaning (Myers, 1999) the most appropriate way for this research was to choose a qualitative, ethnographical approach. Ethnography is the study of people through participant observation and interaction (Atkinson, 2015). Because fans are dispersed globally and are resident on social media, netnography was selected as the best way to study this topic. Netnography is ethnography online, where study of an online group through participating with it is core to the research (Kozinets, 2010). This research focused on UK football club social media communities as a vehicle for the study. Salford City Football Club (SCFC) is a non-league football club in the English Football league. SCFC were chosen as an interesting case of a club that were using social media extensively. Their owners (The Class of '92) were also prominent social media users and in the period of study also utilised social media extensively to reach new fans. This opportunity created a situation which was perfect for a netnographic study.

Robert Kozinets first defined Netnography in 2002 as "ethnography adapted to the study of online communities" (Kozinets, 2002). The words virtual, digital or online ethnography are often used interchangeably in the literature. Adopting netnography means adhering to a specific set of standards and guidelines (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography should always contain online participant observation as a key feature. Kozinets states, "removing the participative role of ethnography from netnography also removes the opportunity to experience embedded cultural understanding" (Kozinets, 2010). Without participation, the study becomes simply a coding exercise and is flat and two-dimensional (ibid.).

Netnography and blended methods

Netnography and ethnography generally utilise an inductive approach using qualitative data collection and analysis (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Kozinets, 2015). This research uses an inductive approach, where findings, results and ultimately theory emerge from the combination of the literature

review and primary data collection. The research philosophy was that of interpretivism, which is about understanding the complexity of human meaning (Klein and Myers, 1999).

Entering the field is known as entrée and it is important for the researcher to introduce themselves on the online communities under study. This is also fundamental to the participant observation aspect of netnography. Methods for data collection in netnography should include online participant observation and can be supported by other, usually qualitative data collection. Kozinets also outlined ethical issues and standards for netnography, drawing on the work of Boellstorff et al. (2012). Kozinets (2015) discussed "virtual verisimilitude;" this concept guides the netnographer to be open, honest, genuine and transparent when interacting and collecting data from online communities. The "netnographer's narrative must be persuasive, credible, convincing and believable" (ibid.).

The three blended methods used in this netnography are participant observation, interviews, and SNA. Screenshots were stored in a secure document and coded using NVivo, qualitative analysis software. This is the method of recording and understanding what is happening from the captured data. The three methods used in this study are now explored in more depth and their specific use in this study will then be discussed.

Participant observation

The concept of observation and fieldwork is a crucial part of ethnography (Van Maanen, 2011). Participant observation allows the researcher to be "immersed in the day to day lives of the people" (Creswell, 2013, p.90). Creswell stated that ethnographers study "the meaning of the behaviour, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture sharing group." Saunders (2009) highlighted that observations are often underused as data collection tools, which add a level of depth and richness to an individual's research data. Saunders (2009, p.289) ascertained "that if a research question and objectives are concerned with what people do, an obvious way in which to discover this, is to watch them do it".

Netnography also relies heavily on participant observation, primarily using online sources from websites, social networks, and other digital platforms (Kozinets, 2015, p.66). Netnography is also flexible and can also make use of offline participant observation where it adds to the online data. This study is somewhere between participant as observer and observer as participant (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). The researcher is open and honest about his role as a researcher as opposed to becoming a genuine member of the community, but occasionally posts to these channels of study. Kozinets (2015, p.266) in particular recommends this strategy. The topic of 'virtual verisimilitude' is particularly relevant to participant observation for "understanding the worlds of other living beings, tasting and sharing the human experience itself".

Social Network Analysis (SNA)

SNA has a long history for research and relates to the idea of mapping out networks. With the growth of online social networks, digital tools for SNA have also grown. Groeger and Buttle (2014) used SNA to better understand the networks involved with word of mouth marketing. They stated that the discipline of marketing "has long ignored a network perspective" and that SNA can address this issue (Groeger and Buttle, 2014, p.1189).

In this study, SNA is used for qualitative research. "The social science approach to SNA attempts to develop a qualitative understanding of node and network properties" (Williams et al., 2015). In this study, SNA is used for:

- Identifying "bounded social networks for netnographers to engage with and investigate" (Kozinets 2015. p.63)
- o Finding out how people connect with each other over time (Edwards, 2010)
- o Exploration of weak ties between people (Granovetter, 1973)
- o Identification of "influential ones in a network" (Kozinets 2015. p.64)
- o To enable subjects to be framed for further qualitative investigation (Hepburn 2011, p.179)

SNA is used as a "means of supporting or adding to data collected by face-to-face methods" (Pole and Hillyard, 2016, p.62). SNA provides a deeper understanding of the connections and flows of information and provides a complementary method to the collection of data through online participant observation and interview. A range of tools was used to draw out potential issues, create new contacts, and add meaning and understanding to the observation and interaction. SNA is therefore a means to understanding the influence that actors have on each other and understanding the "structure and "form" of social relations" (Jarman, Theodoraki, Hall, & Ali-Knight, 2014).

It is notable, however, that ethnography and netnography include participant observation and usually interviews (Kozinets, 2015). The addition of SNA as a method is an acceptable part of netnography, but this also takes additional time so therefore should be carefully considered. This is discussed in more detail in the research design section.

Interviews

"Interviews, along with observations and participant observation, form the core data collection activities of qualitative research" (Belk et al., 2012, p.31). According to Qu and Dumay (2011), research interviews are one of the most important qualitative methods and are often used for ethnographic research. Interviews are used to gather qualitative data by conversing with relevant people within the research study (Oates, 2006). Interviews are often used as part of a case study or ethnography as a way to gather rich information and are often used in conjunction with netnography (Kozinets, 2015). They are therefore important for this case and netnography in order to broaden the understanding of the insight gathered from participant observation (ibid, p.61).

There have been a number of challenges and criticisms of collecting data using interviews. <u>Turner</u> (2010) advised that it is easy for interviewees to get off topic, particularly if they misunderstand or do not want to answer the question. The interviewer must use effective follow up prompts and question reconstruction to ensure the questions are adequately answered (<u>Creswell, 2013</u>; <u>Qu and Dumay, 2011</u>; <u>Turner, 2010</u>, p. 240) outlined a number of challenges including "problems of representation, the nature of language, the inseparability of researcher and knowledge, and the problems of writing." <u>Alvesson (2011)</u> highlighted a reflexive approach to interviews in order to appreciate the multiple levels of meaning derived from the complex social situation of interviews. This means using a solid understanding of theory in order to interpret the interviews.

Kozinets (2015, p.59) also discussed the role of interviews "whether online and off" as a key part of netnography. Netnography can use online interviews only through methods such as Skype and can also use face-to-face interviews, or a combination. Kozinets noted that the rise of video call services such as Skype readdress the balance and criticism of the online interview and in fact are better than phone calls because you can also observe body language and facial expressions. Kozinets stated,

"Even using chat or email for interviews can be valuable, if interpreted carefully" (p.60). Synchronous chat such as Twitter direct messages or email offer similar data to that of forum or social media posts. The interview aspect however offers the ability for the researcher to ask for further information or clarification where it is needed. This can also be a good way to follow up on comments left online to seek further information. The skill and benefit is with the researcher and the qualitative interpretation and analysis.

This research used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with SCFC staff, fans, and communications managers of football clubs to help to answer the research questions. True to netnography, some of these interviews were carried out through distance and online means such as Skype, telephone, email and Twitter. Geographical barriers, time, availability and other factors decided what methods were used for each interview and a range of each was used in the spirit of netnography.

CAQDAS and Coding

QSR Nvivo is Computer Aided Qualitative Data AnalysiS (CAQDAS) software, which is used in a wide range of academic and market research qualitative studies. It can be used to "make content analysis more manageable and ordered, and may facilitate new levels of analysis" (Gerbic and Stacey, 2005, p.48). CAQDAS software was used for the evaluation of qualitative data in this study. All data in this study were transcribed, and relevant netnography data added to Nvivo and encoded with keywords and themes. This helped to make more sense of the rich data in order to shape the study and answer the research questions. Nvivo also includes functionality such as Ncapture, which allowed the downloading of data from web pages and directly from social media for further analysis. The use of Nvivo and CAQDAS is the subject of much debate within the literature. In terms of netnography, Kozinets (2015, p.222) stated that it "allows much more flexibility in coding and takes an inductive, bottom up approach to the analysis of qualitative data

Blended methods

The qualitative methods of participant observation, SNA, and interviews were blended with each other to inform and support the data collection of each. Mingers (2001, p.243) noted the strengths and challenges of using multiple methods. He stated "multimethod research is necessary to deal effectively with the full richness of the real world." He continued, "A research study is not usually a single, discrete event but a process that typically proceeds through a number of phases." Mingers believed that combining multiple methods is the best way for research to progress due to the diversity and richness of approaches.



Figure 1 – Showing three blended methods as part of a netnography

The definition of the word 'blended' relates to the concept of combining different elements to gain positive results. For example, blended learning is the combination of face to face and distance learning technologies, combined to make a greater whole (Heinze & Procter, 2004). The phrases blended research or blended methods appear in the literature, but not frequently in the social sciences or IS literature. The term 'blended methods' is used in preference to the more traditional 'mixed methods' (e.g. Oates 2006; Saunders et al. 2012). This better expresses the design involved in combining the individual methods. Whilst a mixture simply denotes a combination, a blend involves a combination that enhances the quality of the individual components. Thus, a blend of three methods de facto involves triangulation, whilst a mixture does not. The phrase *blended methods* is seldom used in the extant literature, but it is appropriate to this study because of the nature of the way each are designed to work together, informing and improving the data collection to provide greater insight into the study.

Research Design

This section outlines how the blended methods were applied in this case and the practicalities arising from it. In terms of primary data collection, this research uses the blended methods of SNA, interviews, and participant observation to fully understand the case in question. This family of blended methods are encompassed within this netnography. The data collected were triangulated and crystallised (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). A theoretical framework provides a lens for qualitative interpretation of the data, deriving findings and results inductively in the interpretivist tradition. We used social capital as a theoretical framework. It is an appropriate fit for this study as it is about relationships and this also includes connections online. Using the literature on social capital, we used this knowledge to better understand the data collected. It was also possible to link this literature to the primary data to make a further contribution. The table below helps to communicate the research problem, research questions, literature, data sources / types and contributions in this study.

Research Problem	Research Questions	Literature	Data sources and types of collection	Contributions to knowledge/ practice
Literature calls for more studies on digital marketing and football	How is social media being used by football clubs and their fans?	Literature on both social media and digital marketing within sports clubs and other relevant organisations	Participant observation and interview	A strong contribution to theory and practice applied to sports business
Existing research on brand communities focus on big brands	How does social media influence brand communications of football clubs?	Brand awareness and brand community studies, tribal marketing	SNA, participant observation and interview	Greater understanding about the impact of social media for smaller brands
Lack of studies on football fans relating to football fan communications and segmentation	How can social media communications be managed according to fan segmentation	Other relevant studies on football fans, segments, digital communities, marketing and football fan segmentation	SNA, participant observation and interview	Contribution to digital marketing, IS and sport business literature
Growth of social media means that there are a lack of studies in social capital &social media communities	What is the role of social capital in football online communities?	Social capital and social capital applied to online communities and sports	Participant observation and interview	Contribution to the understanding of the role of social capital for social media marketers and the academic literature

Figure 2 – Table outlining the research problems, questions, literature, data and contributions

As discussed, netnography provides guidelines for entrée, observation, data analysis, and ethics. For entrée, Kozinets (2015) suggested for the researcher to set up a web page outlining the research. This was done for this project at (www.alexfenton.co.uk). This site contained information about the project and was also used to disseminate results in a way that could be understood and accessed by a wider readership. Participant observation, combined with interview and social network analysis (SNA) offered the ability to create a blended methods netnography. SNA for social media using tools such as NodeXL. MentionMapp and Followerwonk also offered an interesting dimension and additional data source to support the other methods. Most of these tools work with Twitter primarily as this is the most open network and therefore easiest to analyse. NodeXL can also analyse other networks.

We are not genuine SCFC fans and therefore, it would have been unwise to pose as a fan covertly. The advantages of remaining anonymous or deceiving Salford fans were low and in fact would have posed great risk to the study. We were therefore open and honest about my role as a researcher as per Kozinets position of 'virtual verisimilitude.' With this in mind, we were present in the field, both in person and virtually, including attending matches, interviewing people, following and sometimes posting via digital channels but not genuinely involved as SCFC fans. We followed the ethical standards of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2012) and the guidelines of Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Kozinets (2015) for conducting ethnography online, which advocate openness and honesty. These standards are part of netnography.

Once we had determined the sampling frame of SCFC, the sampling technique was chosen. Two key choices here were probability and non-probability sampling. Probability relates to the fact that the researcher believes this set of people represents the wider sampling frame. Non-probability means that the researcher does not know if the group chosen for research is representative. Each person may have his or her own characteristics, which are not shared with the wider sampling frame. Non-probability may be used when it is unfeasible to use probability sampling due to time, cost or lack of information, but the final results can be much harder to generalise.

As statistical inference was not important to this study, we decided that non-probability sampling was more relevant than probability. Fans and other relevant people connected to this case formed the sampling frame. It would have been impossible to gather data from every single person connected, which would amount to a network of hundreds of thousands of social media followers. For this reason, we employed maximum variation and a snowball sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013). Snowball sampling was also used to tap into the relevant networks and the social capital within groups, delving into the case. This meant that as we interviewed and connected with people, they also suggested other people to speak to and follow. This insight was invaluable in finding new contacts and better understanding the network. It was important to me to have a variation of opinions from a range of ages, genders and connection types in order to gather a range of views. The two strategies combined help to cross the gaps between networks.

There were a total of 35 interviews with 25 interviewees who were officially interviewed as participants for this study. Some of these participants were interviewed multiple times at varying intervals to ask new questions including what (if anything) had changed over time.

There were three primary phases of interviews at different parts of the study:

- Phase 1 in 2015 initial interviews
- Phase 2 in 2016 new and follow up interviews

• Phase 3 in 2017 – a final three verification interviews with social media and football brand managers / experts

The dates of interview varied depending on the phase of study and the availability of participants, so the timing was also fluid. In some cases, interviews conducted online spanned over several days and sometimes weeks.

In terms of practicalities, a spreadsheet allowed me to keep track of the interviewees in this study. The table below gives an example of how each participant was anonymised using a participant number (P1, P2 etc.). The role of the interviewee and number of interviews also provide the reader with more detail before the findings are presented.

Participant ID	Role	Number of interviews
P1	Football Social Media Officer, non league	2
P2	Football Webmaster, non league	1
P3	Football club Project Manager, non league	1
P4	Director of Communication, Championship football club	1
P5	FA communications official	1

Figure 3 – Example of how to present the interviewees to the reader using a table

We transcribed the first set of interviews, but after discussion with the supervisory team, we decided that the engagement of a professional transcriber would be preferable. This decision was made to 'play people to their strengths' maximize my time to address the other elements of the research. Some authors suggest that the researcher should also be the transcriber. Whilst this may be considered by some to be the ideal situation, the fact that the researcher is also carefully reading and coding the interviews and other data, addresses this issue.

The channels used in this study included:

- Twitter SCFC account, fans, players and other relevant people
- Facebook official and fans groups
- YouTube SCFC have a dedicated channel, where fans and opposing fans also comment
- Club forums and websites SCFC have an unofficial forum and there are other rival club and league forums

Data was captured over a period of two years where screenshots of important moments and relevant online conversations and observation notes were stored in a secure document on an on going basis. We spent most time on Twitter as this was the most open network with the most activity, followed by Facebook and the club forums. All of the platforms were monitored periodically over the two years.

In the interpretivist tradition, we used our understanding of the situation and the research to identify relevant key conversations and moments, for example a club forum being closed or a spike in social

media activity when SCFC were on TV. The data capture also helped me to shape the research questions and iterate back to the literature read. We then imported everything into the qualitative analysis software Nvivo and coded it. A thematic coding approach was adopted where themes were derived from the data and then codes added to the text. We added all interview transcripts, SNA diagrams, and online participant observation screenshots to Nvivo. We created three folders for each of the methods and coded these against an inductively created set of nodes enabled careful analysis of the data in order to derive findings and theory in the ethnographical tradition.

There has been great interest in the approach from colleagues within academia and in industry for market research. In this research, the methods were blended; for example SNA was used to identify key influencers on Twitter and whom they are connected to. It also identified other actors who are less connected and where they are located. Their posts were further analysed and this also highlighted other participants for analysis and interview. Interviews give insight to and from a particular SNA visualisation, which is further analysed qualitatively. Each of the methods is informing and contributing to the other and providing qualitative insight. The screenshot below demonstrates how a Twitter network of a fan can be mapped out to identify new people to connect with and observe.

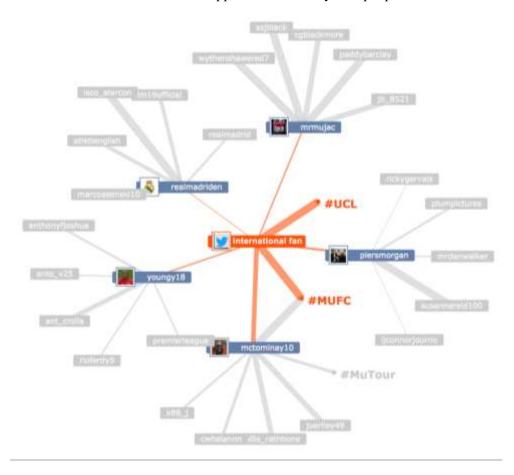


Figure 4 - Mentionmapp SNA diagram of the Twitter interactions of an international SCFC follower who supports Manchester United. The thicker lines show more conversations.

Practical lessons learned

SNA and online participant observation often led me to new lines of thinking and new questions. Two challenges arose from this inductive approach. Firstly, keeping the line of sight of the study so that it retained focus. Secondly, finding appropriate targeted answers to questions. In the first instance, in order to keep the study focused – We adopted the analogy of the torch beam. The analogy enabled illumination on the question, but kept me focused so as not to stray down other interesting pathways that are potentially distracting from the main area of concern.

Interviews enabled more targeted answers, but it was not always possible to interview the person required to answer the question due to time, availability or political concerns. One particular participant refused to be interviewed and once this refusal has been made, the researcher can do nothing but respect that request. We were able to overcome this gap in understanding by using participant observation and secondary data via a book written on the subject. Without revealing too much about the specific person and case, my advice is to approach all potential interviewees with the greatest respect and if they refuse an interview, simply look for other ways to bridge this gap in your knowledge. This may include other interviewees, other methods or literature.

Conclusions

The combination of the three blended methods used as part of a netnography outlined a contemporary approach to the ethnography of social media. This combination utilised three qualitative methods that worked together to support each other. Whilst it is relatively common to combine participant observation and interview as part of a netnography, the addition of qualitative SNA to support a blended approach presents a new opportunity and methodological contribution. SNA was used in this study to identify influencers for further participant observation or interview using an interpretive approach. From the three methods, the data gathered from interviews was the most targeted in order to answer the research questions. Because of the nature of this interpretive study however, the data gathered from SNA and participant observation and the blend between the three was very valuable in deriving rich insights.

An interpretivist philosophy worked well for this study, as it was inductive and exploratory, gathering data and iterating over a longer period. This approach allowed answers and theory to be derived from the data and to explore the complexity of human meaning. Whilst this approach can sometimes lead off on other interesting pathways, the torch beam analogy brought focus to the study. The flexibility of interpretivism also gave the study more agility than other approaches. Earlier in the paper, we explored the philosophical contribution of Klein and Myers (1999). They highlighted that this approach is not about finding truth, but exploring social relations in order to create deep insights. This research study explored the relations between people from the interpretivist tradition. It aimed to contribute to the body of literature exploring online social relations from this perspective, and as such did create deep insights. It did this by utilising an interpretive approach to understand the complexity of human meaning (Klein and Myers, 1999). This involved iterating between different parts and making meaning from the rich data collected from three methods over two years. The practicalities of this research and some of the tools and challenges of blending methods were described. It was found that blending qualitative methods as part of a netnography was an effective and suitable approach to study contemporary communities. People are often interacting socially online as well as offline and it is therefore appropriate for ethnographers to follow these communities wherever they are and use the data and tools available to create new insight.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1) Discuss the difference between blended and mixed methods.
- 2) What made for an effective combination of methods in this case study?
- 3) Why was interpretivism appropriate in this research? In what way could the research be followed up by a positivist approach?
- 4) Define netnography and suggest research for which you think it would be an appropriate methodology.
- 5) In what circumstances would it be appropriate to use SNA as part of a netnography?

Further Readings

Kozinets R V. Netnography Redefined. SAGE Publications; 2015. Available at:

https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/netnography/book242765.

Web Resources

http://kozinets.net/ - Founder of Netnography Robert Kozinets blog

www.alexfenton.co.uk - Researchers blog and netnography entrée / dissemination

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